

## Resistant Lawmakers Now Back Higher Gas Mileage Standards

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Thursday, May 4, 2006; A05

Amid a growing public outcry over rising gasoline prices, several long-resistant lawmakers indicated yesterday that they may consider raising fuel economy standards for passenger cars for the first time in more than 30 years.

Though it remains unclear whether Congress will actually force automakers to produce more fuel-efficient fleets -- a company's car lineup must now average 27.5 miles per gallon, while many advocates support making it 33 mpg for both cars and light trucks by 2015 -- several House members who had opposed higher fuel economy requirements now say they back tougher standards.

The House may vote on the issue later this month when it considers legislation to grant the president greater authority to set CAFE (corporate average fuel economy) standards for passenger cars. In the Senate, Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.) wrote the president on Tuesday that they "plan to consider all legislative options to strengthen fuel efficiency for cars and trucks."

Rep. Michael Bilirakis (Fla.), a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, is one of several Republicans who now support tougher CAFE rules. In a hearing yesterday on the subject, Bilirakis pressed Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta on whether automakers have the technology to produce more efficient cars.

Mineta responded that manufacturers are already producing car fleets averaging about 30 mpg, 2.5 mpg above current requirements.

Bilirakis said carmakers have not taken advantage of existing technology, adding: "You realize of course, the pressure that we're under."

Bilirakis is not alone. GOP Reps. Michael N. Castle (Del.), John R. "Randy" Kuhl Jr. (N.Y.) and John E. Sweeney (N.Y.) have all switched their stance and now back stricter federal requirements. Kuhl changed his mind after he surveyed his constituents late last year: Of 4,000 respondents, 70 percent supported more stringent CAFE standards.

House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood L. Boehlert (R-N.Y.), who along with Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) has tried to raise CAFE standards to 33 mpg since 2001, said the political climate has shifted.

"The momentum is clearly on the side of the angels," said Boehlert, who ended his testimony before the Energy and Commerce Committee yesterday by delivering a slightly off-key rendition of the Ruby and the Romantics hit "Our Day Will Come."

But Boehlert and his allies still face a tough fight: Last year their proposal failed 254 to 177 in the House, while a similar Senate amendment lost by 67 to 28. A number of Democrats from auto-producing states, along with many Republicans, argue that stricter fuel efficiency standards could cost U.S. manufacturing jobs.

"We want to improve CAFE standards if at all possible and improve efficiency in a way that saves gasoline, but we don't want to, in doing that, drive the U.S. manufacturing automobile industry out of business," House Energy and Commerce Chairman Joe Barton (R-Tex.) said yesterday.

Congress initially set the passenger-car fuel economy standard in 1975 under President Gerald R. Ford, with the expectation that automakers would meet it in 10 years. President Bill Clinton added 0.2 miles per gallon to the requirement, but Congress then passed legislation starting in 1995 that blocked any further increase.

Bush persuaded Congress to lift the prohibition in 2001, and a National Academy of Sciences study that year concluded that a standard of 33 mpg was feasible and would not compromise passenger safety. But Bush has not pushed for such a change, instead opting last month to increase fuel economy standards for light trucks by an average of just under 2 mpg over four years. That move will save about 10.7 billion gallons of gas over two decades -- less than one month of current U.S. gasoline use.

The administration is now seeking authority from Congress to set stricter passenger-car efficiency standards: Barton's panel will take up that legislation next week. But Mineta cautioned the process could take a few years, and he could not say what target the administration would seek.

"If you're looking for a number, I wouldn't be able to pick a number out of the air," Mineta said at yesterday's hearing.

Markey, who said the administration already has the authority to increase the mileage requirement, said the standards he and Boehlert support -- which would save about 2.6 million barrels of oil a day by 2025 -- will only "come out of Congress." He added: "Members of this committee are feeling enormous pressure on this from constituents."

Republicans were still seeking a way yesterday to show the public they care about rising energy prices. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) said he was abandoning the idea of offering consumers a \$100 gasoline rebate; Castle said he and other lawmakers "are looking for better measures."

"Reasonable CAFE standards are both achievable and valuable to a good energy policy," Castle said. "And I don't think there's any doubt CAFE would have an impact on the consumption of oil and gas in this country."